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Passage of Legal Aid bill hailed

By Kenneth Hart

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ASHLAND — The director of an agency that provides legal aid services to low-income Northeastern Kentuckians called the passage Tuesday of a bill that will restore most of Legal Aid's lost funding a victory for the poor.

"(March 11) was a great day for low-income people in Kentucky because this will provide nearly as much money for legal aid programs as was lost because of the various cutbacks," said Dick Cullison, director of Legal Aid of the Bluegrass, which has offices in Ashland, Morehead, Lexington and Covington.

The four Legal Aid programs in Kentucky, which provide civil legal services to the poor, had been facing the loss of about \$1.6 million, mostly because of cuts in funding from federal sources. About 42 percent of Legal Aid's budget comes from federal dollars. House Bill 163, passed on the final day of the legislative session, is expected to provide Legal Aid with about \$1.3 million by increasing, by \$5 and \$10, respectively, the filing fees in district and circuit courts.

The measure passed the House by a vote of 90-5 on third reading Feb. 24, and 36-0 in the Senate on Tuesday. The bill again cleared the House 78-6 with a Senate amendment on Tuesday as lawmakers wrapped up the session. It now awaits Gov. Paul Patton's signature.

Past funding cuts have forced Legal Aid of the Bluegrass to lay off staff and close its offices. But, the passage of HB 163 provides the agency, and other Legal Aid programs, with a steady and stable revenue source, Cullison said.

"The nice thing about (the filing fee increase) is that once it's there, it's there," he said. "It's not like an appropriations bill where you have to fight for funding every year. It's money we can count on and money we can use to stabilize our work force."

Cullison said funding provided through the bill could also result in a "slight expansion" of the agency's staffing level and services.

Passage of HB 163 also demonstrated "how effective strong constituent demand can be on legislators," Cullison said.

"People said going in that we didn't have much of a chance in a short session, and that it would be difficult if we did not have strong support in the Senate leadership early," he said. "But I think what happened is that there was some strong grass-roots support that

was communicated to the rank-and-file legislators, and the leadership in both houses ultimately saw the wisdom of this bill.

"We were just real proud that the General Assembly saw the need to afford more funding to satisfy the legal needs of the poor in this state," Cullison said.

Legal Aid of the Bluegrass assists approximately 5,000 poor and elderly residents each year, including more than 500 in the Ashland area and about 1,000 in the Morehead area. The agency is a major provider of legal services to victims of domestic violence, including filing emergency protective orders and divorce papers and assisting with child-custody issues.

Traci Gibson, community services director for Safe Harbor of Northeastern Kentucky, a regional domestic-violence shelter, estimated that about 70 percent of Safe Harbor's clients receive assistance in one form or another from Legal Aid of the Bluegrass. Gibson said passage of HB 163 was "wonderful news for our agency.

"We're thrilled that the service is going to stay in place," she said. "Without it, there would have been one more barrier to prevent many women from leaving abusive relationships."